

Oregon Nisei Veterans WWII Memorial Highway  
SB 1509 Testimony

January 30, 2022

Dear Distinguished Committee Members,

My name is Eric Ballinger and I am a Yonsei, fourth-generation Oregonian and Japanese American. My Issei, first-generation, great-grandparents immigrated to the Hood River area in the late 1890's from Okayama Prefecture, Japan. It is an honor to testify in support of SB 1509 regarding the proposed dedication of Highway 35 as the Oregon Nisei Veterans WWII Memorial Highway.

The idea for this bill came to me through a culmination of life experiences. I was well aware of Dick Tobiason's work on the dedication of our highways throughout the state to honor our veterans and I was reading an article regarding his proposed Bill SB 790 and I thought to myself, "Why isn't there a highway in Oregon dedicated to the Nisei Soldiers of WWII?"

I first met Dick through a mutual friend, Bob Maxwell. At the time, Bob was our country's oldest living Medal of Honor recipient. Our mutual passion for history and veteran affairs resulted in the sharing of books, one of which was Linda Tamura's *Nisei Soldiers*. I suddenly realized that Linda Tamura and Dick Tobiason had to meet if the idea of a Nisei Veteran's highway in Oregon could one day become a reality.

As the oldest grandchild of Harry and Kazuko Morioka, I interacted with the second-generation Nisei throughout my childhood and into my adult years. As I reflect back on my own personal experiences with this generation, I realized how interested I became in my heritage. I found very little information or resources, and most of my elders had few words to share regarding our history. I found a copy of Linda Tamura's *Hood River Issei* and her collection of oral histories. I saw a picture of my great-grandmother, Fuku Morioka, in the Minidoka concentration camp on page 205. I started asking my grandparents what happened to them during WWII. I discovered their experiences during the war were so difficult and challenging that they had no desire to talk about those moments. Even my mother had no idea her parents were incarcerated at Tule Lake until she was in high school. As for me, I received no formal education on this topic in public school in Southern Oregon.

I realized that my Nisei grandparents were keepers of a history that needed to be told and shared. Inspired by Linda Tamura and her efforts to preserve Japanese American history, I started to write down my family's experiences during WWII. Their story is not only about the time spent in American concentration camps, it is one of loyalty and patriotism. I would like to share two stories from my family.

My great-uncle, Shige Imai, was born in Dee, Oregon in 1920. In an effort to prove his loyalty to America, he enlisted in the US Army the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. He was prepared to defend his country without hesitation. During the war, the local American Legion in Hood

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River posted the names of those actively serving on their "Wall of Honor." While Shige was still enlisted, the American Legion removed 16 of those names from the wall because they were of Japanese descent. Shige Imai was one of those names removed. Despite intense racism in the Hood River Valley, he returned to raise a family. He worked for Diamond Fruit Growers for 28 years and served as the Volunteer Chief of the Dee Fire Department.

My grandfather, Harry Morioka, was born in the Dalles, Oregon in 1915. He and his parents worked a small farm owned by the Seufert family close to where the Dalles Dam is now located. With the onset of WWII, and Executive Order 9066, his family was reduced to a number. My grandfather's number at the Tule Lake concentration camp was 16381. From this camp, my grandfather enlisted in the US Army and was placed in the segregated Japanese American 442<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. He eventually served in the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) as an interpreter. He did this despite losing his own freedoms, and with his family living in make-shift housing behind barbed-wire fencing. My family lost their property, their livelihoods, their communities, their rights, their pride and their honor.

The 442<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, with their motto "Go For Broke," went on to become the most decorated battalion in WWII. In less than two years, they earned 4,000 Purple Hearts, 4,000 Bronze Stars, eight Presidential Unit Citations, 21 Medals of Honor, and eventually, the Congressional Gold Medal and the French Legion of Honor.

I am here today to represent the Nisei generation and to honor their sacrifice, their bravery, their patriotism and their loyalty to this country. The Nisei Veterans I got to know; Shige Imai, Hit Imai, Harry Toda, Shige Hinatsu, John Otomo and my grandfather Harry Morioka, gave everything they had in the struggle for freedom, civil rights and a better tomorrow. Let us continue to tell their story and honor their sacrifice for the generations to come. I urge you to pass SB 1509.

Sincerely,

Eric Ballinger